

Indigenous Partnerships in Knowledge and Northern Social Research

Harvey Feit

Thanks very much. I am actually looking forward to the results of the research Malcolm described on how polar bears regulate their weight. I realize also, that I am virtually the only obstacle between you and drinks and dinner, but I'll beg your patience and continue.

Introduction

In this presentation I want to address two issues. First, I want to indicate that much of the social science, humanities, and health research which has been done to date in the North may not well serve the needs and interests of the northern peoples who have traditionally been seen as both its subjects and its ultimate potential beneficiaries. Then I want to indicate some recent global developments in the human research disciplines that are beginning to change the ways social research is generally understood and conducted by social researchers themselves. These latter changes lead to very similar kinds of developments to those which are needed to meet northern peoples' concerns and expectations. I am not going to summarize specific research and policy accomplishments or failures, nor am I going to indicate the specific recent developments which explore the new directions. Others participating in this conference, both northern- and southern-based researchers, are better qualified than I to do the latter, and I look forward to learning much from them as the conference proceeds. The brief bibliography lists several recent review statements.

An Interpretation of Different Views

Research on northern aboriginal peoples has been a major area of professional activity only during the last three decades, although organized research goes back to at least the turn of the century, and non-aboriginal explorers, missionaries, administrators, and traders have written about the aboriginal peoples' ways of life since the earliest official contacts with Europeans. In recent years, an increasing number of people of aboriginal descent have undertaken research as scholars and as applied researchers, and northern communities and regional organizations have gained an effective say in what research can be conducted in their villages and on their lands. But this is not, I think, all that is desired nor all that needs to be done.

A consequence of the fact that, until recently, most of the research—although ostensibly about and for the benefit of northern peoples—has been planned, directed, and written by and for non-aboriginal people, is that much of it has been initially shaped by practical and conceptual issues which are seen as important by Euro-Canadians. These practical concerns and orientations are not necessarily those of northern peoples; indeed, they tend to be systematically different, and often are insufficiently relevant to the conditions and

expectations of northerners. The research problems and analyses have been shaped by pervasive interests and themes in Canadian national economy and polity, which also shape government policy making and economic development, and the kinds of information which are perceived to be necessary and relevant to those interests.

As a result of the pervasiveness of these and other differences, the northern human research done to date has often, indeed typically, not served northerners very well, if I understand what they have been saying. This is partly because it has not benefitted sufficiently from their input, and, therefore, it has not responded as adequately as would be possible to their priorities as they see them. Often, according to northerners, the results of the research are not even effectively communicated back to the communities.

In addition, much of the southern-initiated research assumes a superior base of knowledge, which is not always an accurate reflection of conditions. For example, it is in fact only relatively recently that detailed and practical research has been undertaken anywhere in the world which focuses on the future of small-scale societies in relatively isolated regions, which practise land-based, subsistence wildlife production jointly with market-oriented activities. The effort to continue the changing but unique ways of life practised today by many of the northern aboriginal peoples is one of the most complex, significant, and least understood issues which face northerners, policy makers, and researchers. And while the outcomes are unpredictable, northern peoples' knowledge and experience of maintaining their distinctive ways of life over the past decades are as rich as any in the existing world literature on the topic. Thus, both local knowledge and comparative research results from elsewhere in the world will be critical to improving the chances of continuing local autonomy. Researchers can, therefore, contribute knowledge drawn from elsewhere, but northerners are the experts in developing and applying such knowledge in their region.

Now you may wonder if I exaggerate the extent to which southern Canadian researchers, policy makers, and administrators are guided by Euro-centric assumptions and values today. And I want to emphasize that there have been very significant changes in the last decade (a few of which are cited in the references list). Many of the researchers working in the North today do seek to serve northern interests, and in practical terms they do succeed. But, still, they often are not yet meeting aboriginal peoples' expectations and needs. It is not that researchers are not changing, but we ourselves are deeply embedded in traditions, and it really is harder to work from a position that does not assume that one knows better what the problem is, or what the outcomes of current processes could be.

Aboriginal peoples themselves have new doubts about their individual and collective capacities to maintain their ways given the problems and threats which now must be faced. Many aboriginal leaders now find themselves confronting choices which can lead to different futures for their peoples, and the outcomes are uncertain.

Human research in the North is, therefore, an area in which it is critical to continue to respond to the growing expectation and demand for northern-initiated research, to be based

in communities and directed by northern peoples. Where appropriate and, I expect, often, such research will be done in full and equal partnership with southern-based researchers and institutions. Such research will best be able to meet the complex and challenging goals to which aboriginal peoples aspire.

Recent Developments in Social Research

Interestingly, the social sciences, health sciences, and humanities are going through a period of reorientation and re-evaluation of their own. The processes of globalization are taking cutting-edge science out of the urban centres of Western countries and relocating important work at centres spread around the world, and this process is leading to a diversification of ways of pursuing scholarship. Japanese, Chinese, Arab, Russian, and East Indian social researchers, among others, are bringing new perspectives to international social studies. These global developments complement, and give additional impetus to, the expectations northern peoples have of researchers, because they are changing the way the researchers themselves understand the processes.

The shifts which have been occurring in human studies for the last decade have many facets. One of the core aspects of the change is the growing awareness that the perspectives from which Western scholarship has developed—its questions, formulation, languages, methodologies, dissemination, and application—are but one set of practices, standards and visions of what human research should be; however valuable and productive that framework has been (and it has been extraordinarily productive) there is no reason or legitimacy to its claim to be the only and exclusive means to valuable and applicable knowledge, or even the only knowledge which is worthy of being called science. Indeed, it is mere dogma to claim to be the exclusive means to reliable and valid knowledge, because that could never be proven. In addition, it is a patently erroneous claim. I hasten to add that I am not at all dismissing the accomplishments of this Western tradition; I am questioning, as others have recently, their claims to exclusivity. I would also hasten to add that there are, of course, good reasons for critically assessing all claims of knowledge and for rejecting any type of unanalysed or ill-considered idea parading as knowledge. But there are no reasons for failing to acknowledge the expertise and insights of other systems of pure and/or practical knowledge developed by other peoples and societies. Whether one works on history, health systems, social science problems, wildlife management, or philosophy, there has been an active and growing recognition within each of these fields that there are important contributions to be learned from other traditions of systematic knowledge, from oral traditions, local social practices, and what is widely called indigenous knowledge.

A second core aspect of the recent changes in the human sciences is the growing critique, from the social research community itself, about the epistemological assumptions of social research and analysis: How do we come to know what we write about? Most social research, it is pointed out, is typically written by a scholar/author who does not appear as part of the account of the research process, who writes from a position of isolated and solo

objectivity, as if who the researcher was did not affect what was examined, questioned, done, observed, or concluded. And we often write as if the data and many of the insights were not learned by the researcher, in the first instance, from the specific real people who were subjects of the research. That is, we tend to write as if we just studied people as objects of research, people who did not influence what was examined, questioned, done, observed, or concluded. We rarely note that the researcher and the people who are the "subjects of study" were typically co-operating together in the social research process. Yet this is exactly what actually happens, albeit in differing degrees, in human research of all kinds.

Human researchers who, over the last decade, have stopped simply taking for granted the formalized canons of how research is supposedly done, and who have started reflecting on and writing about the actual research processes we go through as researchers, have almost universally found that the research process itself involves us in decisive social relationships, involving participants and researchers in communicative and interactional processes critical to the results of the research. The results are, therefore, shaped in profound ways by who the research author is, and by who the research participants are. This is not a political statement *per se*; it is what many social researchers around the world now recognize as a more intellectually honest and analytically adequate account of the process of gaining knowledge through research with other human beings. We have often thought of social research in the model of the hard sciences, but there is a renewed understanding that this model is inadequate, and a much more socially rich and adequate understanding is emerging of research as a social process.

We are slowly learning how to conduct human research in light of this better understanding of what we as researchers really do. Social research is really much more complex than has been pretended, and yet it is much more like ordinary life. The key is the realization of how decisively human research ties the researcher and those who are written about together in a social process, a process in which they all are standing and communicating from the same epistemological ground. There is no separate position in human research from which the researcher does his or her observing of the subjects. Information, data, and understanding emerge from communication among researchers and participants. Even in relatively structured social research, the researcher learns and writes from within the experience of interacting with co-actors in complex but everyday social settings.

This has opened human researchers to an awareness that, methodologically and epistemologically, all social research is a co-operative project, whether we have recognized it as such or not. In the past, we typically have not recognized this sufficiently. Now we are slowly learning to create appropriate forms of research, with the participation of the people with whom we work, in order to put our research on a more self-consciously adequate foundation, to give it sounder analytical results, as well as to make it more useful and acceptable.

These developments from within the human sciences have profound implications for the way northern human research should be conducted, and many of these implications parallel and complement the expectations which northerners have been expressing.

Examples: Contrasting Procedures, Changing Times

It may be appropriate here to note how some of these issues have become clearer to me as I look back on my own research experiences. My first research job was working as a summer student researcher for a major university research team which was concluding a multi-year study of social changes in northern aboriginal communities in the late 1960s. My job was to revise the processing of the responses which had been given by over 300 James Bay Cree interviewees, each of whom answered a large survey questionnaire involving some 225 questions. The revision was necessary because the first examination of results indicated that many answers appeared inconsistent to the researchers, and they were unclear what the survey results meant. It was assumed at first that the categories into which answers were classified were not well set up. My job as a young graduate student was to clarify the questions which had been asked by talking with the more experienced researchers, and then to develop clear categories for classifying the responses of the interviewees. I worked several months on this, and, to my consternation, I was unable to make the answers "fit" the categories the researchers had intended to ask about, except for those questions which asked for the most straightforward factual information.

The researchers had wanted to get at people's reactions to the socio-economic changes going on in their lives, and to understand how people's values were altering. The more senior researchers had spent months living in the communities over the previous several years, doing specific studies. And they had come back to the university to write the survey questionnaire together, and then went back to spend months up North administering it. As we re-examined the questions and the responses, it became clear that the responses were logical, once we saw that the questions themselves could be understood in multiple ways, ways that were quite different from those intended by the researchers. It was a shock to realize that the responses were not easy to interpret because the questions had not been easy for respondents to interpret. The survey had failed as research and as communicative interaction. In the end, all but the most factual data from the survey, that is most of the data, were abandoned and not used.

One of the few happy consequences of this experience for me was that I decided to do northern ethnographic research, and I got to spend a year and more in a northern community for my doctoral research. This involved a study of Cree hunting culture, and I was helped by Cree to record both highly quantitative data on hunting lands and practices, and information on Cree knowledge of land, wildlife, spirituality, and hunting practices.

When, in the mid-1970s, I was involved in the committee which established the James Bay and Northern Quebec Native Harvesting Research, times had begun to change, and the

research was jointly run by indigenous organizations and governments. As a result, there were Cree staff working in both the South and the North, along with the government and university-based researchers. With the advice of the Cree staff, the research team created a procedure for developing the first questionnaire for that research, a largely factual but complex survey of wildlife harvests. The procedure involved initial drafting by non-aboriginal statisticians and survey experts, and Cree administrative and field research staff, working as equals. The questionnaire was then tested and revised through three stages. These included testing among research staff, testing with senior Cree community leaders, and then full field tests. At each stage, problems of ambiguity, translation, and precision were identified by both Cree staff and the interviewees, and appropriate revisions were made. In total, about 10 people—seven Crees and three Euro-Canadians—spent nearly two months developing the questionnaire. When it was used successfully during the first year of the research to interview active community hunters, the learning process continued; and the questionnaire was revised substantially for use in subsequent years.

This research, which was from the beginning a joint undertaking, depended on a complex process of research design, involving ever wider and more extensive communications among aboriginal and non-aboriginal researchers, and between them and other people from the Cree communities. In the end, complex understandings of Cree concepts of property and ownership of game, of social relations, and of seasons and temporality had to be learned by all the researchers. It was necessary to understand ownership concepts in order to ask, "How many animals were killed by you during the last year?" in such a way that animals were not doubly reported; for example, by the hunter who first saw signs of the animal's presence, or by the hunters who first sighted it, first struck it, struck the killing blow, recovered it, received it as a gift, skinned and butchered it, distributed parts of it, or those who ritually processed the bones or made thanks to the spirits for its being killed. It was necessary to understand Cree social relations to assure that heads of households did not include harvests by people who would also be reported by others (for example, children hunting independently, fostered children, or visitors). Equally, this was essential so that everyone would be included and no one omitted by those who were identified as heads of households. We also had to adapt the seasonal periods and the annual cycle which were referred to in our questions to fit Cree temporal concepts.

Thus, even in a very factual information collection process, researchers had to enter complex social relations, and become competent with complex social data. The researchers had to not only learn how to ask their questions, they had to change the questions to fit Cree conceptions and practices, in order to ensure that the information which emerged from the two-way interviewing process was complete and clear. And to do this, they had to have a complex co-operative research process involving community-based and southern researchers.

Personal Lessons and Reflections

Increasingly, researchers are recognizing that these social processes are at the heart of all successful human research, whether the subject be quantitative game harvests, medical questions, the collection of oral traditions and stories, wildlife management, or impact assessment.

The processes are more complex in less narrowly focussed research. As I have been going over the notes and data I collected during extended ethnographic fieldwork from 1968 to 1970, and again in the mid-1980s, I have begun to realize, much more than I did at the time, how much my research was shaped not only by the people I interviewed but also by the several Cree people who worked as what I called my "assistants". The middle-aged Cree who served as translators, interviewers, and researchers took the initially provisional list of interview questions I had developed as a young researcher, and daily translated and revised them into effective Cree questions. From their rephrasing, and from the answers they elicited, I learned how to ask questions about hunting, personal life, and spirituality in Cree culture. And, in the process, I learned the Cree ideas and knowledge about each of these areas.

But what was going on was richer than translating. The few Cree with whom I worked closely suggested topics I should learn about and questions I should ask, and whom I should talk to about particular topics. It was highly efficient to have their advice, and I learned more quickly. But what I did not fully realize at the time was that they had a vision of how the research should develop which was as well developed as my own, and their vision of what the research should cover was even broader than I dared to hope for. What I did not initially know was that they were people who already had a long experience of explaining Cree life to outsiders, and of helping outsiders to "discover" the Cree world. Some had worked as interpreters and assistants to the early Indian Affairs Department agents, or to fur traders. Others had worked for previous researchers and various local whites or tourists. And my "assistants", therefore, had very definite skills and plans for how research about Cree hunting should be conducted. They were not just translating and assisting; they were very definite influences on how the research developed, the topics it addressed, the perspectives we explored. It was not at all that they opposed what I wanted to do; quite the opposite—they strongly supported it, because they saw Cree land and hunting practices as areas which more outsiders needed to know about. And they saw this as one way to do that.

I must admit that I did not have sufficient appreciation of the diversity and depth of their research skills at the time, and so I never really asked their advice directly and generally about how I should conduct the research. But with various suggestions and information, they expanded my research to cover what they thought it should include, as well as what I had planned. Its emphasis on spiritual knowledge, as well as on the impacts of history on present decisions, were added by them. It is only now, long after the events, that I can see that the research which emerged over the months of working together was a combination of what I had wanted and what they considered essential. This is clear in my field notes and

data, where there are clear similarities between what my assistants themselves said about Cree hunting and what data we were able to together collect from the community at large. However, I hasten to add that I used enough different assistants, and was directly involved in so many daily activities with different families, that the research was not solely shaped or controlled by one or two Cree only. But neither was I in full control. What the Cree co-researchers contributed was vital, and it greatly improved the research.

Now there is nothing surprising in this. If we work closely with people over periods of many weeks, months, and, eventually, years, and if relationships are not authoritarian and are respectful, as personal relationships which survive in Cree communities must be, then two colleagues will necessarily jointly shape their work together. But what is worth noting is that this is not how human researchers have been taught to think about the research process, and it is not how researchers have generally written about it.

So I only slowly came to realize that in a very real and practical sense, I did not just have Cree research "assistants" working with me; I was, in fact, part of a joint research team doing research on Cree hunting. And this was the case even though I did not fully recognize it at the time. The monetary compensation I paid to some of the Cree participants did not reduce in any way the complex partnership in which we were engaged; it did not turn them into employees with no say in what was being done. And it did not in any way reduce my professional obligation to acknowledge the intellectual and scholarly contributions of local co-researchers and participants. I brought certain kinds of specialized knowledge to the project, but the Cree co-researchers brought other kinds of specialized knowledge. We co-operated in our work, with respect for each other's skills, and gathering data with the same epistemological footing. This was so even though, in that particular scheme of things, I was the one with the time and skills to write up and publish the results in the South.

These processes are being realized widely in human research today. All research—albeit in varying forms and depth—is part of social processes that involve the "researcher", "co-researchers", and the "subjects" in a joint activity. What social researchers are recognizing is that all human research is inherently a collaborative process, and one that can most truthfully be done by fully acknowledging and enhancing this aspect of the activity.

Conclusions: Indigenous Knowledge

A feature of these changes is that collaborative research paradigms are emerging that have the potential to more readily respond to the expectations of peoples in the northern regions of Canada. The kinds of recognitions and changes in the way research is conducted which are sought by northerners are fully consistent with developments occurring globally in social research. If human research is, by its very nature, co-operative, then several activities are essential:

- that researchers acknowledge the contribution of community co-researchers and of the interviewees and other participants;
- that research be designed and developed in ways that fully incorporate local visions of how research should be done and what goals it should seek to achieve;
- that results of the research be jointly owned and controlled by researchers and by participants;
- that research results be fully returned to communities; and
- that the contribution of traditional knowledge be acknowledged and enhanced.

Such research paradigms are now being developed in the North, and it is a region where some of the most important initiatives are taking place. In important respects, human studies in the North thus find themselves not only responding to changes in local expectations but to global shifts from which they can draw support.

And northern human research also now has the potential to be on a leading edge of these global changes in human research paradigms. These changes are still in their infancy, but they are leading to new forms of collaborative research which can contribute vitally to changes in international and Canadian research more widely.

A theme which runs throughout these comments is that "traditional" knowledge needs to be better recognized as "expert" knowledge by researchers, policy makers, and by Canadians generally. But such recognition needs to go beyond just incorporating bits and pieces of the knowledge of elders into Western science. It must recognize two basic changes to our previous assumptions.

First, we must systematically acknowledge that there are non-Western systems of knowledge that are rich and continue to survive as distinct, and that are based in northern communities. This implies that northern aboriginal researchers will continue to increase their numbers and skills, and that, as they do, they will enhance their influence on and control of research in the North. We can also anticipate that they will adopt some Euro-Canadian forms of investigation while also developing and promoting indigenous forms of knowing, and that the two will be linked in the North in new and emerging forms of research, some of it collaborative with researchers from the South, some of it excluding southern researchers and institutions.

Second, we must acknowledge that all human research, by whomever, is inevitably a social and collaborative enterprise between all the researchers involved and subjects of research. And this should be fully recognized in the research process by having those who work on the project and those who the research is about play a full partnership role in all research. The developing legislation and ethical guidelines on northern social research accomplish some of

this goal, but much more fully collaborative processes need to be developed on the ground. And the implication of this analysis is that such changes should not be left to the legislators and political organizations alone to develop. Recognizing and enhancing collaborative processes is an obligation of the researchers themselves if they are to honestly acknowledge the intellectual and moral basis of social research. Both researchers and the people whom the research is about will find this a more honest and fruitful way to do what has already begun.

Finally, such changes need to be better known by the public and by the policy-making communities. And they are important as a means of contributing to the vision of aboriginal peoples as truly equals, peoples who have and share a core of cultural wisdom, distinct from, but as valuable as, the achievements of "Western civilization". Recognition by social researchers can and should help bring this about.

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